Eli West Interview

This interview took place on September 28th, 2025, at 931 Gallery in Denver, Colorado.

Eli West is a contemporary fiber artist, steeped in surrealism, pop, and absurdity and advocating for social justice and environmental responsibility. I was interested to talk with West because he enlists the notions of agitation, pressure and transformation as conceptual and material frameworks for his work. This squares with my interest in geology as metaphor for psychological experience. In this conversation, he articulated agitation and pressure as harmful forces that impact the queer community but also as hopeful survival elements underpinning safety and transformation. This parallels my consideration of geological pressure as descriptive of trauma and also as emblematic of opportunity. He mirrored my perspective that play and humor can serve as key catalysts and also "extend a handshake" with challenging content, as Sitterud said. Interestingly, in contrast to Sitturd's insistence on the importance of *legibility* of concept to ensure successful advocacy and critique, West sees *illegibility* as a protective practice to ensure safety and prosperity. This offers me perspective on a range of approaches. Also, West identified contemporary culture as being broken, as *fragmented*. This supports my idea of fragmentation as a manipulated state disparate from a true or ideal state. Like Marcus Fingerlin, West expressed the valuable role that discomfort can play in alleviating anxiety; acceptance of what is, as foundational to wellbeing and effective problem solving, which parallels the point of view of my thesis. He also echoed my expression of existential despair and resonated with the icon of the

anvil, and he highlighted the comfort and generative value of sharing the burden of our grief through creative output (whether in art or writing).

Julie Jablonski: To start us off, can you describe your practice?

Eli West: I identify as interdisciplinary with a focus on textiles, working mainly with needle felting and wet felting, largely out of their materiality and accessibility which I imbue with a sense of play.

Julie: You are advocating for queer experience and queer voice. As you explain, “my desire to work in felt is born from a space of agitation and pressure, the very elements that are required to form raw fiber into felt held in congruence with my own playful impulses. These material qualities also become emblematic of my experience in fragmented and increasingly bigoted contemporary culture, which requires an equivalent amount of agitation, pressure, transformation, playfulness as survival.”

EW: And that's my relationship with felt.

JJ: That’s interesting to me because my thesis work is exploring agitation, pressure and transformation but through geological metaphors. Can you talk about that and how playfulness ties in.

EW: I think a lot of queer people, specifically gay men, use humor as a way to be welcome into spaces and be able to take up space without being intimidating to other people. This is how I can wiggle myself into the art world and also feel like I can belong if you never knew that I needed to belong here. We're taking up space, but it's not something that's really legible to an untrained eye. Being able to work in a language, both materially and visually that is illegible for other people, keeps me away from criticism in a way – there's a level of defense mechanism coming in.

JJ: Humor is armor?

EW: One hundred percent. And it's also orgasm for me. It's both. And it cracks me up. When you've got a body like this, there's always gonna be some crazy billowing thing coming out of my ear, or my eyebrow's gonna look psycho, perfection is unrealistic. What I hold my art to as a standard, I need to hold myself to as well, physically, and they're very much entwined. When I'm comfortable in my body, is when I'm comfortable in my work a lot of the time. Acceptance. Being comfortable in the discomfort.

But there's such a cloud over all of us right now. Everything is so futile. We're watching everything get washed away. If you are not having a meltdown right now, then what the fuck are you doing? I kept saying, I'm just going to work in my sketchbook, but then I just kept drawing anvils.

JJ: Oh, anvils! That's my whole thing right now. Wile E. Coyote.

EW: Maybe that seeped in from your work. Because I'm feeling crushed. So I'm just gonna read my book—Kent Monkman's *Miss Chief Eagle Testicle* novel which had me weepy and feeling really good—the recognition of just how fucked we are.

JJ: One last question, can you talk about the ancient aspects of weaving and if that means anything for you?

EW: Yes, the ancient aspect definitely has been really appealing for me with my craft focus work. It is really hard to not be appropriate with what you're doing and it's very important to set your sources. With felting, it's popped up in most cultures around the world and it predates weaving. I think the oldest textile in existence was felt found in permafrost in Siberia. So, there's this sense of connection and global lineage that comes along with it that I'm really drawn to. Also, the lack of rigid rules. With weaving, you have to make sure that you have your warp and your weft completely aligned, but with felting you can kind of fuck around and it's a little bit

more forgiving, which I also like, because I get really agitated with rules. And it's also a great workout, great exfoliate, and it engages all your senses. You use hot water and soap for wet filling and that is so soothing and it's like a full body workout depending on what scale you're working on. And for needle felting you can just really focus in and let that energy out.